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Dis-obedience to the Father Bracha L. Ettinger's Theory and Installation Confronted with Freud and Lacan

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to study the underpinnings of the matrixial theory introduced by Bracha L. Ettinger, and her installation in the Freud Museum – to be more precise, Freud's study room – so as to examine their paradoxical status in Freudian-Lacanian space(s). As I attempt to show, both parts of Ettinger's activity are not against the Law of the Father, but rather they constantly dis-obey his rules; Ettinger tirelessly endeavours to include the Mother alongside the paternal order. We thus observe not so much the rejection of Freud's and Lacan's paradigms as the movement on their boundaries and their subsequent transgression – and this may be seen as the greatest promise Ettinger provides us with.

KEY WORDS: Bracha Ettinger, matrixial theory, mother figure, installation, disobedience

Entrance to the Paternal Space

Freud's final consulting room at 20 Maresfield Gardens, London, preserved as a part of the Freud Museum, is occupied among others by his famous couch, and a vast number of antiquities and books that he managed to bring from Vienna. This overcrowded – and, as a result, overwhelming – space ruled by laws constituted by Freud himself is simultaneously inhospitable for guests and intimate; yet, in 2009 a certain incursion occurred. Between 2nd June and 26th July, an installation created by Bracha L. Ettinger, comprising numerous paintings, notebooks, private photographs and objects, and other intimate elements, was carefully arranged within Freud's last home. Due to the gesture Ettinger made, her thought, art and history could confront both Freud's legacy and his private life

after the escape from pre-war Austria. This encounter of two pasts provides an opportunity to look into the relationship between Ettinger and the Founding Fathers of psychoanalysis. The fact that this meeting was staged in this specific space gives us a hint about the artist's motivation. Far from defying the paternal order, she entered the rooms of Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna in search of the space for the Mother: a figure that tends to be seen as unintelligible, or even, as some would have it, psychotic.

Ettinger's intervention in the reconsideration of the mother figure appears on several levels. Firstly, she is a visual artist, producing various kinds of works, often at the intersection of different media. Being a member of the Second Generation after the Holocaust, in her art Ettinger repeatedly tackles feminine and maternal issues and themes, be it through the use of private photographs of her mother or the historical picture of women from the Mizocz ghetto taken just before their execution. She is also a clinical psychoanalyst, whose experiences stemming from years of practice with patients are indirectly inscribed in her notebooks. Constant interlacing of these two fields (which is to be elaborated on later in this section) gives rise to Ettinger's major contribution to Freudian-Lacanian thought: the matrixial theory. This feminine/feminist supplement to classical psychoanalysis, grounded upon the notion of the matrix – the prenatal signifier of non-phallic feminine difference¹ – carries the potential to challenge and rethink such issues as singularity of the subject, ethical relation and transmissibility of trauma, to name a few. Therefore, while Ettinger questions Freud and Lacan and, in a sense, breaches their rules, her aim is in fact to expand the scope of their thought so as to include femininity, often mistreated in their texts. Such a strong emphasis on femininity renders her close to French cultural feminism; another similarity is to be found in Ettinger's writings, employing *sui generis* theoretical * criture feminine* (POLLOCK, "Mother Trouble" 13). However, Ettingerian theory ought not to be mistakenly taken for a form of essentialism – the female body serves here as a model for conceptualisation of difference, mirroring the function of the male body in classical psychoanalytical thought. Moreover, the masculine discourse of the Founding Fathers is by no means threatened or overthrown; instead, its seemingly universal status is reconsidered in terms of subjectivity formation, as the matrixial offers a different path towards it, provoking the shift of paradigm.

Although such an intervention appears to be radical, Bracha L. Ettinger – as I will endeavour to demonstrate – tirelessly returns to her psychoanalytical roots, trying to create a room for dialogue there. The aim of this article is to study the underpinnings of the matrixial and the installation in the Freud Mu-

¹ The matrixial feminine, however, ought not to be mistakenly understood as accessible only to women. It is non-phallic, non-Oedipal and non-gendering, since it is not premised on the presence/absence paradigm. Thus, as Brian MASSUMI claims, "it is accessible to any body – on the condition that it surrenders itself to the several [...]" (212).

seum so as to examine their paradoxical status in Freudian-Lacanian space(s). As I will endeavour to prove, both Ettingerian theory and the installation are not against the Law of the Father, but rather they constantly dis-obey his regulations; we thus observe not so much their rejection as the movement on their boundaries and their subsequent transgression – and this may be seen as the greatest promise Ettinger provides us with. For the sake of conciseness, although I bear in mind the interpretative potential of all three spaces in the museum, I choose to focus on Freud's study room, since in this very place the laws of the founding father of psychoanalysis face feminine and maternal tropes in a singular manner.

As it has been hinted at, matrixial theory and artistic activity of Ettinger are tightly linked to each other; indeed, it is difficult – if not useless – to treat them as fully separate entities. She points out, using the example of painting:

Theory does not exhaust painting; painting does not melt into theory; painting produces theory and seeds that can transform it. Theory does not alter painting in process; it can grow shoots from it, and translate them into its own language. While painting produces theory, theory casts light on painting in a backward projection.

ETTINGER, "The With-In-Visible" 94

We can note that theory and art ought not to be understood as interchangeable terms – they by no means merge into each other. Yet, artistic activity appears to give rise to theoretical reflections and provide underpinnings for them, whereas theory in return helps us comprehend – to a certain extent – that which we observe in art. As Ettinger delineates, after years of struggling to choose either one or another path – to devote herself to either artistic or psychoanalytical work – she started to incorporate both spheres in a unique manner. Simultaneously, she noticed that the nomenclature and paradigms proposed by psychoanalysis were insufficient in terms of not only artistic creation but also femininity, female corporeality and difference (ETTINGER, "Working Through" 43). The matrixial theory Ettinger proposes becomes a natural result of her observations, experiences and explorations on the verge of these two strata. Keeping that in mind, I will undertake the task of separating (temporarily) theory from art, in order to systematise and clarify the interpretative material used in this article. Hence, in the following section I will describe and explore the installation in the Freud Museum; subsequently, I will turn to theory itself, (re-)connect it to the mentioned artistic activity, and examine its peculiar dis-obedience to the Father(s).

Familiarising Freud's Study Room

The installation in the Freud Museum was entitled *Resonance. Overlay. Interweave*. Bracha L. Ettinger in the *Freudian Space of Memory and Migration*, and it was curated by Griselda Pollock, one of the most profound Ettingerian scholars. It was composed of three parts, each of them belonging to one room. Sigmund Freud's consulting room was filled with subtle, yet numerous additions, such as photographs from Ettinger's private collection, most of them depicting her family members before, during and after World War II, but also a few private pictures with her daughter and son, several personal objects, finally Ettinger's notebooks and works of art. The aforementioned elements were – using Pollock's interpretative frame – to resonate with the items and writings present in Freud's room. The second part – corresponding to the “interweave” theme – was staged in Anna Freud's room, and consisted of Ettinger's paintings with the mother theme, excerpts from notebooks on Dora, and photographs documenting Ettinger's gesture of placing the mentioned objects in the previous room. In the exhibition room of the Freud Museum (which had been Sigmund Freud's bedroom) the last part of the installation was placed. Herein, Bracha L. Ettinger's artistic *oeuvre* was presented, comprising a significant number of her paintings (which, to use Brian Massumi's expression, “come in crowds”² (204)), notebooks and works on paper.³ In this article I wish to concentrate on Sigmund Freud's room, since it is in this space where paternal tropes intermingle with most intensity with the maternal-feminine intervention of Ettinger.

In the consulting room we can witness the arrangement of not so much two – Sigmund Freud's and Ettinger's – as several histories. Freud was able to bring most of his belongings – including furniture, books and an impressive collection of antiquities – from Vienna when he was moving to London with his daughter Anna. Without the necessity to separate himself from his past, he was thus able to re-create his previous home. Except for that, in many respects his escape resembles the exodus-like fate of Ettinger's parents, Polish Jews, who had no other choice than to flee. What testifies to Uziel Lichtenberg's story is a diary from the war period, during which he survived ghettos, labour and concentration camps, and finally reached Palestine. The original notebook was put by Ettinger on Freud's desk next to an excerpt from his own diary covering the last years of his life. Other items used in the installation belonging to Ettinger's father were two slide rules, connected to his profession. Bluma Lichtenberg's story

² Ettinger is known for her series of paintings; among them, the *Eurydice* series is the most famous.

³ See: POLLOCK, *Art* 24. Pollock's book is devoted fully to this event, being not only a detailed description and a photographic documentation, but also a set of scholarly articles on the installation.

also included a struggle to escape and a journey through a number of countries to Palestine. Although less directly associated with the war, her “testimonial objects” – to use an expression coined by Marianne HIRSCH and Leo SPITZER (178) – are lyrics of a lullaby handwritten in Polish and a spoon. Objects connected to not only her parents but also the rest of Ettinger’s family are photographs from the period before, during and after the war, some of them multiplied and distributed throughout the whole house. Another element is a trace of Ettinger’s intimate story of motherhood, which can be grasped in portraits with her daughter and son, placed on the shelves close to family photographs. Yet, the viewer can also experience her art. The “canvases” for her works on paper presented in this room are: a pre-war picture of her parents taken in Łódź, drawings from the Little Hans case study, and aerial photographs of Palestine territory from 1917. It is also worth mentioning that Ettinger includes Dora’s story in her installation, present in one of her notebooks, lying on the desk near the writings of Freud and Uziel Lichtenberg. Certainly, by no means does the provided delineation form an exhaustive account on the contents of the installation in the Freud Museum. However, it allows us to note that through this careful yet not intrusive disposition, Ettinger finds – but in fact also finds – a line of connection between the outlined (hi)stories.

As it has been noted, Ettinger’s intervention in the space of the Father makes the entrance of the Mother possible in a threefold way. One of the objects mentioned above is the lullaby in Polish. It may symbolise soothing, or taking care of the child in its fragile moment of going to sleep. Yet, it is not meaningless that the piece is written in Polish: the “mother tongue” that forms “[t]he acoustic envelope of a maternal voice” (POLLOCK, *Art* 60) for Ettinger, who does not speak this language. The tongue of her mother’s (and parents’) trauma remains impossible to comprehend in terms of language, but it is accessible in terms of affect. Another object that testifies to the mother’s presence in this space is the silver spoon lying among sharp iron or bronze objects belonging to Freud, having contrasting, more masculine connotations.⁴ Its flattened tip marks the childhood of Bracha Ettinger: the reason for misshaping the spoon is her eating disorder. We read in one of her diaries, referring to her “infantile anorexia” and her mother’s desperate action: “In shared and silent despair, my mother cruelly saved my life in daily, sadistic gestures: food” (ETTINGER, *Matrix* 85). The spoon thus became a *sui generis* weapon, whose aim was to protect and rescue the daughter, close to starving herself to death. Hence, this object is related to Bluma Lichtenberg’s remarkable – but painful – act of life-giving and devotion. Finally, the maternal figure also reappears in a number of photographic frames distributed throughout the room. Concerning Bluma Lichtenberg, numerous pictures portray her in different places and temporalities: as a young girl walking along the street of

⁴ POLLOCK describes these devices as “objects of violence” (60).

pre-war Łódź with her future husband, as a refugee during the war,⁵ and with her children and other family members after the war. Photography is a medium via which also Bracha Ettinger reveals her double connection with the mother figure: as a mothered child in the picture mentioned above, and as a mother to her own children. The latter pictures, seemingly mundane, depict her intimate relationship with her babies; in one of them she puts her child in the central part of the photo, hiding her own face, in two pictures she hugs the baby affectionately, while in the last one she makes an expression of biting a child. All these images contribute to the feeling of connectedness and proximity to the mother.

Re-turning to the Matrix

What we can witness in Freud's consulting room "occupied" by Ettinger's installation is an encounter of pasts, temporalities, histories, experiences and traumas of the people concerned. This staged meeting can be characterised predominantly as care-full – abundant in empathy and care, but simultaneously attentive, as the additions do not merely overlay the space they use. However, despite this consideration, the boundaries between what belongs to Freud and what Ettinger adds are shaken: it may sometimes be hard to distinguish between the original setting and the new elements when it comes to objects or photographs. Such a disturbance contributes to the sense of closeness, shareability and interaction. What is striking in her intervention is an overall image of compassionate connectedness: of engaging in a dialogue despite the differences, and of producing a space for agreement and mutual understanding.

All the above features are simultaneously the attributes of the matrixial concept of *subjectivity-as-encounter*. As Ettinger maintains, a chain of separations is not the only – or the first – path towards subjectivity. Instead, subjectivity is primarily an encounter "occurring at shared borderspaces between several co-affecting partial-subjectivities that are never entirely fused or totally lost, but share and process, within an always-already minimal difference, elements of each unknown other" (POLLOCK, "Introduction" 3). Therefore, several partial-subjects are to meet, share their experiences and – as a result – change each other in the humanising stratum of the matrix, producing subjectivity-as-encounter. Emphatically, that does not mean that the difference between them ceases to exist, or that they fall into symbiosis or fusion (POLLOCK, "Mother Trouble" 5–6). Rather,

⁵ This photo's function, as Pollock maintains, was to inform Uziel Lichtenberg that Bluma had survived (*Art* 68).

they participate in togetherness that “fragilizes” and transforms them, challenging the seemingly stable boundaries of subjectivity, while keeping the necessary differentiation. This is why the Ettingerian notion of subjectivity is actually a *trans*-subjectivity – it is never formed in solitude.⁶ Crucially, one ought to note that such a rephrasing does not aim at shattering the central position of the Phallus. In fact, it just shatters its universality. As Ettinger claims, the Phallus reigns the postnatal, but it is virtually inexistent in the prenatal phase: a phase that serves as a model and inspiration of the matrixial theory (ETTINGER, “The Matrixial Gaze” 84–85). The matrixial mode of subjectivity-creation operates on the borders of the *I* and the *non-I*, as well as beyond and before the Oedipal stratum conceptualised by classical psychoanalysis, thus assuming the important – yet by no means centralised – role.

In her theoretical reflections Ettinger returns to the classical texts of Freud and re-reads them in order to find room for femininity. She also deconstructs his arguments, exposing the phallic logic behind them. Among others, she takes a look at “The ‘Uncanny,’” in which Freud mentions *Muttersleibphantasien*, the fantasies “of intra-uterine existence” (FREUD, “Uncanny” 244), but – as Ettinger observes – he links them directly with castration, hence dismissing the possibility of the feminine (ETTINGER, “The Matrixial Gaze” 47). What Ettinger proposes is that along with the castration complex there co-exists the matrixial complex, or the *maternal womb/intrauterine* complex, connected to the notion of the matrixial phantasy. We read:

While *castration phantasy* is *frightening at the point of the emergence of the original experience before its repression*, the *matrixial phantasy* (from *matrice*, for womb) is not frightening at the point of its original emergence, but becomes frightening when the experience is repressed. [...] Thus for both complexes the same affect, that of anxiety, accompanies the return of the repressed.

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Simultaneously, Ettinger claims that the matrixial withdraws with the postnatal phase, in which the castration complex and Oedipus complex come to dominate. Still, such a perspective seems unthinkable from the Freudian viewpoint; precisely, it is maintained that Freud supports the need to deny the womb, since its recognition may threaten the integrity of the (male) child, who would have to acknowledge that he does not possess all the organs (54–55).

In its core, the matrixial theory questions the idea that the male body provides us with the only possibility of theorising difference, based on the *presence/absence* binary opposition. This is why Ettinger re-turns to the womb, finding in it the universal site of difference, experienced (prenatally) by every human being.

⁶ “In the matrixial perspective, *becoming-together* precedes *being-one*” (ETTINGER, “The Matrixial Gaze” 72).

For this very reason in the matrixial the categories of gender are not of primary significance, since this sphere applies to and welcomes all subjects (ETTINGER, "Weaving" 184). As it has been noted, the feminine bodily specificity becomes an inspiration for this stratum. The matrixial theorist clarifies it as follows:

I take the feminine/prenatal meeting as a model for relations and processes of change and exchange in which the *non-I* is unknown to the *I* [...], but not an intruder. Rather, the *non-I* is a *partner-in-difference* of the *I*. The *late* intrauterine encounter represents, reflects, and provides meaning to internal and external realities related to non-Oedipal sexual difference viewed through the prism of the feminine *beyond-the-phallus*. It can serve as a model for a *share-able dimension of subjectivity* [...].

64–65

We can sense the emphasis on closeness that does not turn into the act of merging into one – a "fusion with the mother" (KRISTEVA 47) – on the one hand, and rejection, aggression or split on the other. Instead, sharing and exchange become the underpinnings of the matrixial affective experience, which dominates in the prenatal state, but is able to return postnatally.⁷

Evidently, the matrixial theory is not constructed to contradict the father of psychoanalysis and his laws, but to challenge them. When it comes to Jacques Lacan, Ettinger claims that the Phallus – depicted as having a privileged status⁸ – is insufficient. The Matrix, in turn, is a prenatal signifier of feminine difference, which is possible, but not within the phallic frames. It is not, however, posited as a substitute for the Phallus, or a binary term to it, since that would result in falling into the Phallus's own rules. Instead, the Matrix is a form of a supplementary signifier beyond the Oedipal order, leading to the extending of the Symbolic.⁹ Emphatically, as this signifier escapes language and representation, it is unspeakable, but nevertheless it is thinkable in terms of affective experience. In point of fact, the Matrix in itself connotes compassion and intimacy, instead of being a part of a dyadic *either/or* structure in which separation is the primary value. As a result, the logic followed by Ettinger and her system is that of inclusion, *both/and*, but also *between/and*, as the meeting takes place between several subjects, who, due to the structure of an encounter, are partial.

In the feminist revisions of psychoanalysis a long history of discarding the Phallus or/and falling back into its logic can be traced. Ettinger's thought, grounded upon her artistic activity, her encounters with patients and confron-

⁷ Still, we cannot forget that the prenatal condition is a model for the matrixial sphere, just as the male organ is an inspiration for the conceptualisation of the Phallus. Due to that, Ettinger's thought is by no means essentialist or biologically determined.

⁸ See LACAN, "D'un autre" in ETTINGER, "The With-In-Visible" 100.

⁹ See POLLOCK, "Introduction" 5–7. Emphatically, the Matrix is not perceived as an exclusive addition, since there may be other signifiers yet to be comprehended.

tation with her own (and her family's) history, allows us to think differently. The tangible example of such a different mode of thinking is the *Resonance Overlay. Interweave* installation, which becomes an embodiment of Ettinger's proposition that art is a *transport-station of trauma*: the pronouncement placed in direct dissonance with the Freudian-Lacanian notion of trauma.¹⁰ To clarify, in Ettinger's theory, art is to provide us with a possibility of a traumatic encounter, or an encounter with traces of trauma belonging to *non-I*. Simultaneously, it is not a promise, since the entrance to such a sphere also depends on the subject; to use Ettinger's words, "[a] passage is expected but uncertain, the transport does not happen in each encounter and for every gazing subject, listening subject, touching or moving subject. We can look and observe, but it takes en-duration in con-templation to see" (ETTINGER, "Fragilization" 9). What we can spot here is a proliferating act of dis-obedience to the laws of psychoanalysis: the theorist conceptualises the internal wounding event as shareable via art, moving to the borders of the discourse, exercising and stretching them, and finally inserting her part of the story, yet without excluding herself from the field.

Courageous Dis-obedience

Bracha L. Ettinger's presence in the Freud Museum not only indicates several issues connected to the position of the mother, but also induces change. The choice of venue is by no means accidental: it is not merely an exhibition aimed at showing the particular artist's *oeuvre*, disrespectful to the space it occupies. Instead of trying to veil Freud's room, Ettinger actively interacts with it, engaging in the dialogue and sharing experiences. She questions the Father and his rules, but in a creative way, as she notes the blind spots and ambiguities of his seemingly unquestionable laws. Yet, most importantly – she introduces the mother. Via this installation, the necessity of the motherly space is emphasised on the levels of psychoanalysis, everyday life, history, and art. What is performed here is a courageous act of dis-obedience: of transgressing the boundaries whose sustenance seems to be no longer essential. Due to the pronouncement of the matrixial subjectivising stratum and a series of inclusions in the paternal space, the

¹⁰ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* FREUD defines trauma as a sudden external stimulus that disrupts the subject's integrity; moreover, since at that moment the pleasure principle is suspended, the subject cannot master such a tension and, as a result, repeats the traumatic events compulsively (46, 17). Lacan, in turn, associates trauma with the Real, which is impossible to be symbolised, and, therefore, inaccessible to others as well as the subject affected by it. Therefore, by no means can this inner scar be mastered, comprehended or witnessed as it is (LACAN, "Tuché" 53–64).

woman/mother is given well-deserved and longed-for sphere, yet instead of replacing the figure of the Law, she productively coexists with it, just like the temporalities and traumas introduced to Freud's room interlace with-in each other.

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Bio-Bibliographical Note

Anna Kisiel is a PhD student in Literary Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. She holds an MA degree in English Studies based on her dissertation entitled *Tangible Trauma: Tropes of Gesture in the Context of Psychoanalytically Grounded Theories* (2015) and a BA degree based on her thesis devoted to the motif of intimacy in the self-portraiture of Francesca Woodman with reference to Ettinger's thought (2013). Her academic research revolves around the matrixial theory, psychoanalysis, trauma studies, photography theory, and body and femininity in the visual arts and poetry. Currently she is working on her PhD project concerning corporeality in Ettinger's theory and art. She is an active member of *Gender Studies Centre*, University of Silesia.